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ABSTRACT

The foreign language learner's interest in acquiring a wide range of idiomatic expressions is almost universal. However, it should be satisfied not by encouraging the "collection" of idioms, but in a more organic way, by demonstrating how these expressions arise out of differing human activities or elements in the environment. Lessons should begin with a presentation and general discussion about the part the activity plays in life. The fact that this may vary considerably from country to country can be of special interest. How the different elements in the activity have been transferred into idiom can then be explored. The aim should be to stimulate in the student an alertness to expressions, a gradual growth in familiarity with them, and finally a cautious use. (MSE)

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Summary of Talk by Frank E.Bell (Bell Educational Trust)

Teaching Idioms to Intermediate Students

The foreign language learner's interest in acquiring a wide range of idiomatic expressions is almost universal. Yet it is often argued that, owing to the inherent dangers in encouraging students to learn idioms in lexical or grammatical categories - to "collect" them like postage stamps and subsequently "display" them indiscriminately, often with comic results - this aspect of language should be avoided. This natural interest, like others providing strong motivation, need not be neglected, but may be judiciously fostered.

This is best done by approaching the subject in a more organic way: by demonstrating how idiomatic expressions arise out of differing human activities or elements in his environment, each of which, through the vital part it plays in man's daily life, provides the most graphic basis of metaphor. Examples are: animals, food and drink, clothes, fighting and conflict,colours, gardens and plants, sport, the sea, theatre and many others.

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Teaching Idioms to Intermediate Students

Sheet 2

Lessons should begin with a presentation and general discussion about the part that the particular activity plays (or in some cases used to play)in life. The fact that this is likely to vary considerably from country to country can be of special interest.How the different elements in the activity have been transferred into idiom can then be explored.

The aim should be to stimulate in the student an alertness to notice the idiomatic expressions revealed, a gradual growth in familiarity with them,and finally a cautious use.

(235 Words)

AN APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF IDIOM TO INTERMEDIATE OR ADVANCED STUDENTS.

Talk by Frank E. Bell.

Now, if you ask adult students of English in advance what they hope to be taught or, indeed, in retrospect, what they would like to have had more of, a very common answer is: "Idiomatic English" (or more often, alas, "Idioms) and opportunities to talk."

So at least one can say of this aspect of the subject, students WANT it.

It is a rash teacher who throws away the priceless element of student interest, even though the interest may not be well-founded. (For if a subject which commands a natural interest can be effectively taught, motivation and attentiveness are assured and the lessons are likely to prove to be FUN and enjoyed.)

A lesson that is FUN is worth two that are not. Another reason why this particular element of teaching is fun is that it is what one might call a non-blue-pencil element. That is to say that whereas much teaching of language deals with the elimination of error: this does not; it deals with enrichment and ornament, making what may well already be correct into something that is more interesting.

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What do we mean by Idiom? A wide range of vocabulary from poetic metaphor (words such as drift) to telescoped folklore (such as: to put your foot in it; to pull someone's leg; to skate round a difficulty, to be in the same boat.

Idiomatic expression is perhaps the most esoteric element in language and therefore one of the most elusive and inevitably the trickiest to teach. It is at once the most interesting and the most dangerous.

Interesting, because a command of idiom is an achievement very highly prized. Someone whose control of idiomatic expression is both wide and sure really does give the impression of knowing a language extremely well.

The most dangerous, for surely there is nothing so ridiculous or absurd as using idiom wrongly. It is a rich source of humour on the stage, radio and TV. It is far better not to use an idiomatic expression than to use one half-understood, or idiom that is dated and therefore little more than an outmoded cliché - for example "It is raining cats and dogs" - the favourite phrase of earnest Germans.

Very rare for wrong use of idiom to prove to be an advantage.

The tale of the Swiss student:

"Mr Policeman, you are pulling my legs."

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Because of these difficulties many teachers eschew the teaching of idiom altogether. It is safer to leave it out, they argue.

It is not a proper area for teaching at all.

I do not agree.

The idiomatic element of language can be taught both at advanced and at intermediate levels, provided it is done with GREAT CARE, and above all not in isolation.

THREE QUICK WARNINGS

1) The most dangerous way to treat idiom is by teaching it in lists, as one properly does in straightforward vocabulary.

Straightforward vocabulary and idiomatic expressions are POLES apart.

Students are, in fact, quite ready to learn idiom in that way but they should be discouraged from doing so. They are quite ready to collect idioms like butterflies or postage stamps, but like those other collectors there is the inevitable consequence that they will wish to show the latest acquisitions in their collections to their friends at the earliest opportunity, suitable or unsuitable, and feel deprived if their latest batch of ten idioms or so are not produced in the text of their next essay - or even worse, in their next conversation - like photographs of our latest holiday. A dangerous appetite which should not be fed!

Categorised lists have their place - as works of Reference ONLY.

An example:

USING IDIOMS

A LEARNER'S GUIDE

J.B. Heaton T.W. Noble

Prentice Hall English Language Teaching - 1986.

2) Idioms should not be taught with an eye to encouraging students to put what they learn into immediate active use, for this will engender an artificial background and an ill-founded over-confidence. Idiomatic expressions should only be used as and when they come naturally or they can well become the basis of music hall jokes. This can safely be avoided if students are encouraged to regard this element as a part of their passive knowledge.

The object should be to encourage and stimulate a growing alertness to notice idioms read or heard and only very gradually and cautiously move on to active use.

"Friends to be Recognised"

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3) Do not teach idioms as though they are all of universal application. It is very important to make clear the limitations which so often apply e.g.

"I thought the film very good - as good as gold."

"The weather's quite fresh - as cool as a cucumber."

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A BETTER WAY TO TEACH IDIOM

I believe that the best approach - perhaps the only true and safe one - is to base lessons on idiom on a rather clearer understanding of how idiom came into language.

A little time ago I referred to it as telescoped folklore.

If you will examine idiomatic expressions you will see that they have almost all started as a metaphor taken from a common activity or a significant element of our environment, in each case, the one which happens to illustrate in a peculiarly graphic and succinct way the point that the speaker wants to make.

I believe there can be a series of entertaining and instructive lessons on Idiom.

If they are handled partly and first as studies of activity or environment these studies will show how important the particular activity or aspect of his environment is or was to the life or ordinary people, will often show strong national characteristics, woven most closely into the tapestry of a nation's life, obviously of special interest, that they are in fact organic to the life and language of a country or people and the purpose of the lesson will be to show how a range of expressions enriches the language which emerges from each of them.

They often had a narrow meaning limited to the activity or feature concerned, but they have through the course of time, often several centuries, come to have a wider meaning divorced from their source.

Let me show you what I mean by taking an example:

Time for one example:

Colour

The lesson should begin with a short discussion: What part does colour play in our lives - yours and mine?

Look out of the window
Look at these flowers
Look at your clothes
Look at my tie

What is your favourite colour. Yours? Yours? Goodness me. Is it really?

Suppose all these things were in black and white or grey, like non-colour television or the early films. You don't like colour TV. Oh, why not?

What an interest colour brings to life! What fun then to choose colours:

Walls of our rooms
Curtains
Carpets
Furniture
Clothes
(Produce colour charts)

What is painting all about?

What does a black and white photograph of a painting tell you? Only part of the story. Of course, colour is very important.

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How has colour come into our language?

Let us see.

1. Only very seldom can you clear the reputation
of a man caught in the act of committing a crime.

(19 words)

2. Once in a blue moon
you can whitewash
a man caught red-handed.

(13 words)

This way of teaching, as can be seen in the other topics too, lends itself almost automatically to the production of visual aids of a very individualist kind.

But to come back to our immediate example - what has the second phrase done to the first?

(a) Shortened it

(b) Put the British flag into it:

added - forgive me - colour to a bald and factual statement.

(Here produce large sheets of red, white and blue and invite the class to -

SEE RED

SEE WHITE

SEE BLUE

and out will come the phrases familiar to us, from which will also emerge the different origins of each colour, e.g.

RED for blood

danger and warning

emphasis in print etc.)

Here is a list of other topics which can be treated in this way, just as graphically, and with equally good openings for discussion.

VOCABULARY AND IDIOM

COLOURS

Visual aids: British flag
Paper - red, white and blue
Colour charts

Discussion on the part that colour plays in life.

Red, White and Blue

Dictation: Only very seldom can you clear the reputation of a man caught in the act of committing a crime.

Once in a BLUE moon you can WHITEwash a man caught REDhanded.

RED

What idea does RED give you? (politics, danger, anger, blood, coloured print, etc)

Red China	Communist China
To see a red light	Warning to stop or signal danger
To see red	To be furious
Redhanded	Caught in the act
A red letter day	Worthy of celebration
To be in the red	To have one's bank account overdrawn, To be in debt
Red tape	Rigid bureaucratic formality
To paint the town red	To celebrate wildly
A red herring	An irrelevant argument

P.T.O.

WHITE

What does WHITE suggest? (innocence, purity)

A white lie	A well meant falsehood
To whitewash	To clear a stained reputation
To show a white flag	Surrender
A white elephant	An unwanted gift or possession
A white paper	An official government publication

BLUE

What does BLUE suggest to you? (the sea, the sky, noble blood, right wing politics, sadness, etc)

Out of the blue	Completely unexpectedly
Blue blood	Aristocratic blood
True blue	Faithful to the right principles
A blue moon	A very rare event
A blue stocking	An intellectual woman
A blueprint	A preliminary plan
To blue-pencil	To correct, edit, censor

Other colours of interest:- black, brown, gold, green, yellow, purple.

F.E.B. 1988.

ACTIVITIES AND ENVIRONMENT INTO IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

SOME SUITABLE TOPICS

1. Animals
2. The Bible
3. The Body
4. Clothes
5. Colours
6. Dogs
7. Domestic Life
8. Fighting and War
9. Food and Drink
10. Indoor Games
11. Games and Sport
12. Gardens and Plants
13. Horses
14. Music and Theatre
15. The Sea

F.E.B. 1988